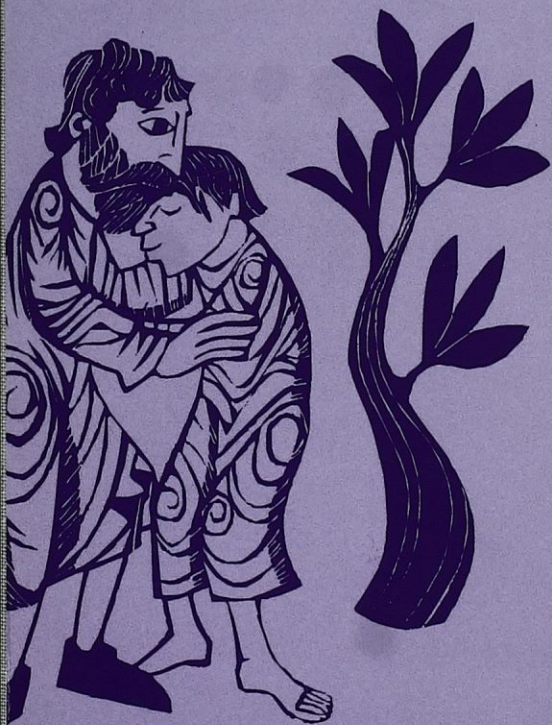


CELEBRATING THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS



UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS
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THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

What happens in the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation is almost more than one could imagine. If we could meet Jesus today, we would expect to be received with love and compassion, because he is perfect and knows what it is to forgive. Instead, we confess to an ordinary human being who represents Jesus Christ sacramentally. We can expect the priest to receive us with love and care and compassion as well—not because he is sinless, but because he knows what it is to need forgiveness. God transforms even our human frailty into the medium of life-giving grace.

—USCCB Subcommittee for
the Jubilee Year 2000¹

In his first encyclical, *Redemptoris Hominis* (Redeemer of Man), Pope John Paul II described the gift of the Sacrament of Penance:

In faithfully observing the centuries-old practice of the Sacrament of Penance—the practice of individual confession with a personal act of sorrow and the intention to amend and make satisfaction—the Church is therefore defending the human soul's individual right: man's right to a more personal encounter with the crucified forgiving Christ, with Christ saying through the minister of the sacrament of Reconciliation: "Your sins are forgiven" (Mk 2:5); "Go, and do not sin again" (Jn 8:11). As is evident, this is also a right on Christ's part with regard to every human being redeemed by him: his right to meet each one of us in that key moment in the soul's life constituted by the moment of conversion and forgiveness.²

1. WHY DO WE NEED THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE?

"Because of human weakness . . . Christians 'turn aside from [their] early love' (see Rev 2:4) and even break off their friendship with God by sinning. The Lord, therefore, instituted a special sacrament of penance for the pardon of sins committed after baptism, and the Church has faithfully celebrated the sacrament throughout the centuries—in varying ways, but retaining its essential elements."³

2. WHAT HAPPENS IN THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE?

In the Sacrament of Penance, "the sinner who by grace of a merciful God embraces the way of penance comes back to the Father who 'first loved us' (1 Jn 4:19), to Christ who gave himself up for us, and to the Holy Spirit who has been poured out on us abundantly."⁴ Likewise, "those who by grave sin have withdrawn from the communion of love with God are called back in the sacrament of penance to the life they have lost. And those who through daily weakness fall into venial sins draw strength from a repeated celebration of penance to gain the full freedom of the children of God."⁵

3. WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE PRIEST IN THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE?

According to the *Rite of Penance*, "the Church exercises the ministry of the sacrament of penance through bishops and priests. By preaching God's word they call the faithful to conversion; in the name of Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit they declare and grant the forgiveness of sins. In the exercise of this ministry priests act in communion with the bishop and share in his power and office . . ." (no. 9).

4. WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE COMMUNITY IN THE SACRAMENT?

According to the *Rite of Penance*, "the whole Church, as a priestly people, acts in different ways in the work of reconciliation which has been entrusted to it by the Lord. Not only does the Church call sinners

to repentance by preaching the word of God, but it also intercedes for them and helps penitents with maternal care and solicitude to acknowledge and admit their sins and so obtain the mercy of God who alone can forgive sins. Furthermore, the Church becomes the instrument of the conversion and absolution of the penitent through the ministry entrusted by Christ to the apostles and their successors" (no. 8).

5. WHEN SHOULD THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE BE SCHEDULED?

The sacrament should be regularly scheduled at times convenient for the faithful.⁶

"The season of Lent is most appropriate for celebrating the sacrament of penance. Already on Ash Wednesday the people of God has heard the solemn invitation 'Turn away from sin and believe the good news.' It is therefore fitting to have several penitential celebrations during Lent, so that all the faithful may have an opportunity to be reconciled with God and their neighbor and so be able to celebrate the paschal mystery in the Easter triduum with renewed hearts."

—*Rite of Penance*, no. 13

6. WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENT FORMS OF THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE?

The Sacrament of Penance takes three forms. Pope Paul VI's eloquent explanation of each rite is provided below.⁷

- a. *The Rite for the Reconciliation of Individual Penitents*—"The first [form] is the reconciliation of an individual . . . with a new emphasis

on the demand for personal dispositions and on the relationship to the word of God. . . . This form of reconciliation is the accustomed one, but enriched by a greater awareness, seriousness, listening, and so to speak, by a new outpouring of divine love and our own inexpressible joy in the knowledge of being restored to divine life. . . .”

- b. *The Rite for the Reconciliation of Several Penitents*—“The second way of reconciliation is that of a communal preparation followed by individual confession and absolution. It combines the two values of being a community act and a personal act. It is a preferable form of reconciliation for our people when it is possible but it usually presupposes the presence of many ministers of the sacrament and this is not always easy.”

- c. *The Rite for the Reconciliation of Several Penitents with General Absolution*—“Then there is the third way, a collective form of reconciliation with a single, general absolution. This form, however, is by way of exception, of necessity, in cases sanctioned by the bishops, and with the continuing obligation of individual [confession] of grave sins, that is, mortal sins, at a later time.”

7. WHEN THE RECONCILIATION OF SEVERAL PENITENTS IS CELEBRATED, IS IT ALLOWABLE FOR EACH PENITENT TO CONFESS JUST ONE SIN?

No. In recent years the practice has grown in which, in consideration of a large number of penitents, each penitent is asked to approach a priest and confess only one sin. Such a practice does not allow for an integral confession as required by the *Rite of Penance*. In order for a valid confession to take place, a full and integral confession must be provided for in every instance. Canon 988 §1 refers to the obligation to confess all serious sins in “kind and in number.”

8. WHEN THE RECONCILIATION OF SEVERAL PENITENTS IS CELEBRATED, CAN A “COMMON PENANCE” BE GIVEN?

No. The *Rite of Penance* makes clear that “after the Lord’s Prayer the priests go to the places assigned for confession. The penitents who desire to confess their sins go to the priest of their choice. After receiving a suitable act of penance, they are absolved by him with the form for the reconciliation of an individual penitent.”⁸

9. WHEN THE RECONCILIATION OF SEVERAL PENITENTS IS CELEBRATED, CAN A “COMMON ABSOLUTION” BE GIVEN?

No. “Each penitent who makes an individual confession during such services is to receive absolution individually from the confessor involved.”⁹

10. WHAT IS “GENERAL ABSOLUTION”?

The third form of the Sacrament of Penance, “General Absolution,” is designed for extreme situations.

Such absolution is in fact “exceptional in character” and “cannot be imparted in a general manner unless: (1) *the danger of death is imminent* and there is not time for the priest or priests to hear the confessions of the individual penitents; [or] (2) a *grave necessity* exists, that is, when in light of the number of penitents a supply of confessors is not readily available to hear the confessions of individuals in an appropriate way within an appropriate time, so that the penitents would be deprived of sacramental grace or Holy Communion for a long time through no fault of their own; it is not considered sufficient necessity if confessors cannot be readily available only because of the great number of penitents, as can occur on the occasion of some great feast or pilgrimage” (*Code of Canon Law* [CIC], c. 961 §1).¹⁰

11. MAY GENERAL ABSOLUTION BE GIVEN SIMPLY BECAUSE NOT ENOUGH CONFESSORS SHOW UP FOR CONFESSIONS?

No. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and the CIC specifically address this point: "A large gathering of the faithful [such as] on the occasion of major feasts or pilgrimages does not constitute a case of grave necessity."¹¹

12. DOES A PENITENT HAVE TO CONFESS THE SIN FORGIVEN IN GENERAL ABSOLUTION AGAIN?

According to canon law, "a person who has had serious sins remitted by a general absolution is to approach individual confession as soon as there is an opportunity to do so before receiving another general absolution unless a just cause intervenes" (CIC, c. 963). Through individual confession, the penitent experiences the healing power of Christ through a personal encounter not made present in the anonymity of the third rite.

13. WHAT AUTHORITY DOES THE BISHOP EXERCISE IN RELATIONSHIP TO GENERAL ABSOLUTION?

The diocesan bishop is the sole competent authority for determining the appropriateness and conditions that must be met for the celebration of General Absolution in a particular diocese (see CIC, c. 962 §2).

“Through the sacrament of penance, we, the faithful, acknowledge the sins we have committed, express our sorrow for them, and, intending to reform our ways, receive God’s forgiveness and become reconciled with God and with the Church.”

—USCCB Committee on Pastoral Practices,
Penitential Practices for Today’s Catholics

NOTES

- 1 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) Subcommittee on the Jubilee Year 2000, *Jubilee 2000, A Year of the Lord’s Favor: A Reflection on Forgiveness and Reconciliation* (Washington, D.C.: USCCB, 1998), 9.
- 2 Pope John Paul II, *Redeemer of Man (Redemptor Hominis)* (Washington, D.C.: USCCB, 1979), no. 20.
- 3 Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship, decree promulgating the *Rite of Penance*.
- 4 *Rite of Penance*, no. 5.
- 5 *Rite of Penance*, no. 7.
- 6 See Sacred Congregation for Rites, *Eucharisticum Mysterium*, no. 35.
- 7 Pope Paul VI, General Audience (April 3, 1974).
- 8 *Rite of Penance*, no. 28.
- 9 Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Pastoral Norms on General Absolution (Sacramentum Paenitentiae)* (June 16, 1972).
- 10 Pope John Paul II, *On Certain Aspects of the Celebration of the Sacrament of Penance (Misericordia Dei)* (April 7, 2002), no. 4.
- 11 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: USCCB-Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000), no. 1483. See also *Code of Canon Law* (CIC), c. 961 §1, subsection no. 2.



GOING TO CONFESSION

Many people have avoided celebrating the Sacrament of Penance, sometimes for years at a time, because they “don’t know what to do.” The following brief explanation is intended for a person who has not been to confession in some time. It explains how the first form of the Sacrament of Penance may be celebrated. The person who is going to confession is called a “penitent” because he or she wishes to do penance and to turn away from sin.¹

PREPARATION

Before going to confession, the penitent compares his or her life with the Ten Commandments, the Beatitudes, and the example of Christ and then prays to God for forgiveness.

GOING TO CONFESSION

The priest welcomes the penitent and then both make the sign of the cross, saying, “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.” Next the priest briefly urges the penitent to have confidence in God.

If the penitent is unknown to the priest, it is proper for the penitent to indicate his or her state of life, the time of the last confession, difficulties in leading the Christian life, and anything else that may help the confessor in exercising his ministry.

THE WORD OF GOD

Then the priest or the penitent may read a passage from the Bible. Suggested passages include Ezekiel 11:19-20, Matthew 6:14-15, Mark 1:14-15, Romans 5:8-9, Ephesians 5:1-2, 1 John 1:6-7 and 9, or another text from Sacred Scripture.

CONFESSION OF SINS AND THE ACT OF PENANCE

The penitent then confesses his or her sins. If necessary, the priest should help the penitent to make a complete confession and to have sincere sorrow for sins against God. The sorrow a penitent feels for his or her sins is known as contrition and must include a resolve to sin no more and to avoid all future occasions of sin.² Through confession of sins, the penitent “looks squarely at the sins he is guilty of, takes responsibility for them, and thereby opens himself again to God and to the communion of the Church in order to make a new future possible.”³

The priest then offers suitable advice to help the penitent begin a new life and, when appropriate, leads him or her to resolve to make appropriate restitution for the harm he or she has caused others. The priest imposes an act of penance or satisfaction on the penitent. The penance corresponds to the seriousness and nature of the sins and may suitably take the form of prayer, self-denial, and especially service to one’s neighbor and works of mercy. Such a “penance” serves not only to make up for the past but also to help the penitent to begin a new life and provides the penitent with an antidote to weakness.

THE PRAYER OF THE PENITENT

After this, the penitent prays a prayer expressing sorrow for his or her sins and resolving not to sin again. A card with several examples of the prayer may be provided in the confessional. The penitent may recite the prayer by heart or read it.

Here is one example of the Prayer of the Penitent:

My God,
I am sorry for my sins with all my heart.
In choosing to do wrong
and failing to do good,
I have sinned against you
whom I should love above all things.
I firmly intend, with your help,
to do penance,
to sin no more,
and to avoid whatever leads me to sin.
Our Savior Jesus Christ
suffered and died for us.
In his name, my God, have mercy.⁴

ABSOLUTION BY THE PRIEST

Following this prayer, the priest extends his hands, or at least his right hand, over the head of the penitent and pronounces the formula of absolution. As he says the final words he makes the sign of the cross over the head of the penitent:

God, the Father of mercies,
through the death and resurrection of his Son
has reconciled the world to himself
and sent the Holy Spirit among us
for the forgiveness of sins;
through the ministry of the Church
may God give you pardon and peace,
and I absolve you from your sins
in the name of the Father, and of the Son, †
and of the Holy Spirit.⁵

The penitent answers, "Amen."

PROCLAMATION OF PRAISE

After receiving pardon for his or her sins, the penitent praises the mercy of God and gives him thanks in a short invocation taken from Scripture, such as "Rejoice in the Lord and sing for joy, friends of God"

(Ps 32:1-7, 10-11), "The Lord has remembered his mercy" (Lk 1:46-55), or "Blessed be God who chose us in Christ" (Eph 1:3-10).⁶

DISMISSAL OF THE PENITENT

Then the priest tells the penitent to go in peace. The penitent continues his or her conversion and expresses it by a life renewed according to the Gospel and more and more steeped in the love of God, for "love covers over a multitude of sins" (1 Pt 4:8).

NOTES

- 1 See *Rite of Penance*, nos. 15-20, 41-47; CCC, nos. 1422-1470.
- 2 See CCC, no. 1451.
- 3 CCC, no. 1455.
- 4 *Rite of Penance*, no. 45.
- 5 *Rite of Penance*, no. 46.
- 6 *Rite of Penance*, no. 206.

SCRIPTURAL SUGGESTIONS

DEUTERONOMY 6:3-9—Love the Lord your God with your whole heart.

SIRACH 28:1-7—Forgive your neighbor when he hurts you, and then your sins will be forgiven when you pray.

ISAIAH 55:1-11—Let the wicked man forsake his way and return to the Lord, and he will have mercy on him because he is generous in forgiving.

JEREMIAH 7:21-26—Listen to my voice, and I will be your God, and you will be my people.

EZEKIEL 18:20-32—If a wicked man turns away from his sins, he shall live and not die.

HOSEA 14:2-10—Israel, return to the Lord your God.

JOEL 2:12-19—Return to me with your whole heart.

MICAH 6:1-4, 4-6—Do right and love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.

PSALM 25—R. (16a): Turn to me, Lord, and have mercy.

PSALM 51—R. (14a): Give back to me the joy of your salvation.

PSALM 95—R. (8a): If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.

PSALM 130—R. (7bc): With the Lord there is mercy, and fullness of redemption.

MATTHEW 3:1-12—Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is close at hand.

LUKE 19:1-10—The Son of Man has come to seek out and save what was lost.

JOHN 8:1-11—Go and sin no more.

ROMANS 6:16-23—The wages of sin is death; the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

2 CORINTHIANS 5:17-21—God reconciled the world to himself through Christ.

EPHESIANS 5:1-14—You were once in darkness; now you are light in the Lord, so walk as children of light.

1 JOHN 1:5-10, 2:1-2—If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all injustice.

HOW TO GO TO

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CONFESSION

1 PREPARATION—Before going to confession, the penitent compares his or her life with the Ten Commandments, the Beatitudes, and the example of Christ and then prays to God for forgiveness.

2 GOING TO CONFESSION—After the priest welcomes you, both of you make the sign of the cross. Then you may wish to indicate facts about your life, the time of the last confession, difficulties in leading the Christian life, and anything else that may help the priest.

3 THE WORD OF GOD—You or the priest may read one of the suggested scriptural passages.

4 CONFESSION OF SINS AND THE ACT OF Penance—Confess your sins. The priest then offers suitable advice and imposes an act of penance or satisfaction, which may include prayer, self-denial, or works of mercy.

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5 PRAYER OF THE PENITENT—Pray a prayer expressing sorrow for your sins and resolving not to sin again. Two suggested prayers are given here:

My God,
I am sorry for my sins with all my heart.
In choosing to do wrong
and failing to do good,
I have sinned against you
whom I should love above all things.
I firmly intend, with your help,
to do penance,
to sin no more,
and to avoid whatever leads me to sin.
Our Savior Jesus Christ
suffered and died for us.
In his name, my God, have mercy.
(*Rite of Penance*, no. 45)

or

Lord Jesus Christ,
you are the Lamb of God;
you take away the sins of the world.
Through the grace of the Holy Spirit
restore me to friendship with your Father,
cleanse me from every stain of sin
in the blood you shed for me,
and raise me to new life
for the glory of your name.
(*Rite of Penance*, no. 91)

6 ABSOLUTION—The priest extends his hands over your head and pronounces the formula of absolution, making the sign of the cross over your head during the final words. You answer, "Amen."

7 PROCLAMATION OF PRAISE—Praise the mercy of God and give him thanks in a short invocation taken from Scripture, such as "Rejoice in the Lord and sing for joy, friends of God" (Ps 32:1-7, 10-11), "The Lord has remembered his mercy" (Lk 1:46-55), or "Blessed be God who chose us in Christ" (Eph 1:3-10) (*Rite of Penance*, no. 206).

8 DISMISSAL—The priest dismisses you with the command to go in peace. Continue to express your conversion through a life renewed according to the Gospel and more and more steeped in the love of God.

ALSO AVAILABLE

Penitential Practices for Today's Catholics

Presents a summary of the Church's penitential practices, the call to pray, to fast, and to give alms, along with a brief exhortation to cultivate a penitential attitude in one's daily life. Includes an appendix of penitential days and seasons in the church calendar, forms of penance, and sample expressions of penance. From the Committee on Pastoral Practices.

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